

The Use of Comma in Students' Writing: Some Grapho-Syntactic Considerations

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Abstract

This article on "The Use of Comma in Students' Writing: Some Grapho-Syntactic Considerations" investigates the use of the punctuation mark comma among students of University of Uyo. English has indices for good and effective written communication, the indices comprising grammar and orthography. The paper aims at determining the relationship between appropriate punctuation and grammar and its effect on good written English. The paper observes that of all the punctuation marks, comma is the most versatile and intricate in writing. To justify this assertion, data on punctuation were obtained from written texts, isolated, categorized and analyzed in line with Error Analysis, the theoretical model adopted for this work. From the analyses, it is observed that units of grammar such as lexical items, phrase and clause structures determine the use of comma in written texts. The investigation reveals that many students use comma haphazardly, one based on ignorance of grammatical rules, and two based on the notion that comma marks a pause. The findings indicate a general tendency towards the insertion of comma where it is not required by comma selection processes and the omission of comma where it is required. The findings also reveal the preponderance of the separation of the subject from its verb and the verb from its direct object by comma contrary to the grapho-syntactic rules of English. Also found out is the inappropriate use of comma in coordinate elements, subordinate clauses and appositive constructions. The paper concludes that there is a relationship between punctuation and grammar. Because of the importance of punctuation in good written communication, it is pertinent to intensify drills on this aspect of language teaching and to make punctuation teaching an integral part of language teaching.

1. Introduction

Whereas the native speaker of English is already competent in the spoken form of the language and continues to grapple with the written form of his native language, the learner of English in a non-native environment aspires to be competent in both the spoken and the written forms of the language. This, of course, makes the process of mastering the language very tasking for these learners as they have to grapple with two broad processes of speaking and writing the language. This is the experience of every Nigerian English bilingual who aspires to know English. Knowing a language involves understanding the intricacies of the language which consist of its structures in the areas of phonetics and phonology, morphology and syntax, semantics and pragmatics as well as the writing convention, if the language is a developed language like English.

Since English is the language of all official activities in Nigeria, high level of competence is required in the use of the language. English is taught in all the levels of education starting from the kindergarten to the primary, secondary and higher education levels. In all the higher institutions of learning in the country, English is consistently taught in schools in order to continuously bring the knowledge of the language to the aspiring bilinguals. In spite of all these effort, there is still preponderance of performance errors.

University education, as the apex in any educational pursuit in the country, prepares her products to function effectively socially, politically and economically (Ayodabo & Ayodabo, 2016). However, the performance of university graduates in job skills and the capacity to speak and write proficiently the language in which job performance is expressed is on a steady decline, especially, when placed on the pedestal that English is Nigeria's official language. Being the official language suggests that all activities of government, and even outside government, are performed in the language. It therefore becomes worrisome when undergraduate students writing in the final year and those of post-graduate students are still inundated with writing errors in a language used in transacting government business and other social activities.

Essien (2003) and Jowitt (2013) have variously discussed the dwindling performance in English by Nigerian English bilinguals. The dwindling performance revolves around ungrammatical expressions, wrong choice of words, poor sense of punctuation and failure to understand the fundamental principles of writing, among others. This paper is motivated by a long period of observation of non-use as well as inappropriate use of punctuation by undergraduate and post-graduate students of University of Uyo, particularly, the use of comma, in spite of its importance in the structure of the English sentence and written communication in general.

2. The English Writing System

The writing system of a language is contained in its orthography. Orthography provides the signs, symbols and rules to follow in writing a language (Williamson, 1984). The English orthography, for instance, according to the same source consists of spellings, alphabet and punctuation. The alphabetic system is the first in the order of

learning how to write English. This is why it is vigorously taught in the primary school to enable a learner write the language appropriately. In using the alphabet in writing the language, the issue of spellings arises. Spelling is a systematic representation of the letters of a word according to an agreed pattern by the owners of a language, and any breach of the rule makes the spelling incorrect.

Lumping words together without any boundary stops a word from being a word in English as well as causes chaos in writing and ineligibility in any piece of writing in English. Punctuation therefore, systematically creates orthographic and meaning boundaries. All the features of writing – spellings, alphabet and punctuation are required in a good written essay. Even though comma is one of the punctuation marks in English and is under the graphology of English, but its use in sentences is both according to grammatical rules and writing convention.

Language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) comprise oral language behaviour and written language behavior. Speaking and writing are productive skills while listening and reading are comprehension skills. These skills are learned not acquired even in first language situation. Fodor (2007, p.705) explains that even in first language acquisition where “a greater part of language structures are innately programmed into human brain, the fact still remains that a learner may not be able to say precisely how the structures interrelate with the word heard” unless they are taught.

One of the writing rules of English is that every sentence should start with a capital letter and end with a full stop, if it is a declarative sentence; but if the sentence is interrogative, it ends with a question mark; if exclamatory, it ends with an exclamatory mark. Between the capital letter and the full stop, or any other terminal mark, lies a whole lot of things like spaces, punctuation, lexical categories, phrasal categories as well as grammatical units (Stott & Chapman, 2001), each entering into a relationship with the other. In every sentence, there are spaces separating one word from another, and sometimes punctuation marks are used along with spaces.

Writing as a productive skill is only deployed in writing quite unlike reading skill which entails silence and verbalization, a process in which the competence of the user is expressed. It is in production, that is, performance, that the writing ability of the user is brought to the fore. Whereas competence is the tacit knowledge a speaker has about his language, performance is “the actual use of language in concrete situations” (Chomsky 1965, p. 4). A native speaker has a cognitive system internalized in his brain, it is this internalized linguistic system or I – language which makes a native speaker proficient in spoken English (Radford, 1997). A second language learner strives to attain the same mental state of competence that the native speaker possesses. When performance ability falls below the expected standards after a period of training, then the performance error becomes a source of concern, especially when the error subsists and manifest in a large number of users. It is this degree of errors involving the use of comma among certain Nigerian English bilinguals that is discussed in this work. When errors are ignored, they become entrenched in the language behavior of the user. The focus of this work therefore, goes beyond the graphology of English and emphasizes the interconnection between punctuation and grammar.

3. Punctuation and Writing

Those marks in writing otherwise called graphic symbols which indicate natural pauses in speech are called punctuation marks. English has several punctuation marks such as full stop, comma, dash, hyphen, exclamation mark, quotation mark, apostrophe, question mark, colon, semi-colon and so on. Punctuation marks are not just marks in the ordinary sense of graphic symbols but also perform very important roles as integral part of the grammatical construction of a sentence. This is why writing is a difficult task. Knowing how to use punctuation marks is a function of learning and are “institutionalized through education” (Babalola, 2005, p.269) since in writing we replicate the knowledge which is in our brain and if the knowledge is not there we cannot realize it in writing. This assertion faults the passion with which most Nigerian parents impose English as the first language on their children such that the children are good in spoken English but poor in written English. In acquiring English as a first language, as many Nigerian children do these days, they do not acquire the writing convention because the writing system is learnt and not acquired and one of those indices to learn is the use of comma.

In writing, ideas are communicated in sentences and paragraphs. Within sentences and paragraphs are punctuation marks. Punctuation is indicated on sentences except apostrophe which is placed on words. The sentence in English may be described graphologically, semantically and syntactically (Eka, 1994, Stott & Chapman, 2001). Graphologically, a sentence starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop – an area of knowledge about English sentence which even at the university level so many Nigerian students are yet to imbibe. Semantically, a sentence is a group of words with a subject and a predicate and expresses a complete thought. It is, however, observed that so many students write sentence fragments for full sentences – that is, a group of words consisting of just one part of the sentence without the other which may be either the subject part or the predicate part, and lastly, a sentence is made of constituents, in that, it consists of divisible parts. These divisible parts are quartered into meaning units by graphic symbols if placed appropriately, and if the graphic symbols are placed inappropriately meaning may be distorted and syntactic infelicity results from it. Punctuation marks are indicated on sentences and perform certain functions within the sentence either to specify or separate

grammatical units, serve as included unit as well as establish meaning relationships among grammatical units (Babalola, 2005, Quirk et al (1985) cited in Babalola, 2005).

Oluikpe (1979) says that as long as the learning process is concerned, there will always be errors. Errors in students' writing therefore, suggest that learning is taking place. Ezenandu and Adesida (2011) note that errors in language use provide teachers an insight to learners' errors and their underlying level of competence. With these, teachers can set their learning strategies (p. 147). They provide type of errors commonly found in students' composition to include direct transfer of structures from L1 to L2, lack of awareness of the features and how to use them, conscious and unconscious transfer of features of speech to writing, formation of plural, spelling, concord/subject-verb agreement, inappropriate lexical choice and wrong sentence construction. Others listed are errors of wrong use of pronouns, inclusion and exclusion of articles and what they term miscellaneous sources of errors (pp. 147-148). Comma belongs to what they describe as miscellaneous class of errors. Headbloom (1979) traces errors in second language learning to mother tongue interference as well as poor linguistic competence.

3.1 The Comma

According to Kings (2000) "the dots, strokes and squiggles" which are represented as punctuation marks "may appear physically insignificant and evanescent in our speech" but are the centerpiece in writing and "without them all would be chaos" (p.155). Comma is one of those marks which may appear insignificant yet very fundamental in preventing chaos in writing. Comma is identified as that mark that indicates the length of a pause (the shortest pause) and its main function is to separate the different parts of a sentence. However, comma indicates the length of a pause according to the unit of grammar the pause appears. This is why comma is very versatile and sometimes difficult to categorise because of its various uses. It is complex and subtle, less emphasized but the most frequently used mark next to period (Babalola, 2005, King, 2000) as the analysis of its use in our subjects' output shows.

4. Methodology

The article makes use of data drawn from students' written exercises such as assignment scripts, long essays, seminars of undergraduate and post-graduate students of the Department of English, University of Uyo. Data was collected over a period of time through observation and the recording of comma related errors preponderant in students written exercises. The criterion for selection was that they violated certain graphology and syntactic rules of English. The work assumes that the data gathered and analysed will give gainful generalisation on the use of comma among English second language learners. The data are classified into groups according to the units of grammar comma specifies or separates and the data deployed is according to the preponderance of such errors.

5. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical model adopted for this work is error analysis. When the form of the language of a learner deviates from or violates the rule of a target language, there is an error (Agbedo, 2015). Whereas a mistake can be self-corrected because it is a slip in performance, an error is not since the learner is not even aware of the error that has occurred (Ekah, 2016). To be an error means that there is a systematic deviation by the learners since they have not yet mastered the rules of the target language and are still in the process of doing so (Corder, 1971 quoted in Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Second language learners commit errors and these errors show that the learners are striving to acquire the rules of the language according to the proponents of this theory.

A language learner, be it a first or a second language learner, passes through stages or a series of continuum whereby hypotheses are formed and tested. Learners constantly modify their hypotheses about the nature and rules of the target language. The learner follows through using inter-language which is the continuum between L1 and L2. After a period of training, their performance is expected to conform to the structures of the target language. Whereby this does not happen, then the systematic violations are regarded as errors because it is clearly established that the learners do not either have adequate knowledge or the right knowledge of the language structure(s) they are learning.

Corder (1981) quoted in Agbedo (2015, pp. 95-96) gives the steps in undertaking error analysis as: collecting samples of learner's language; identifying the errors; describing the errors; explaining the errors and evaluating/correcting the errors. For this work, punctuation errors, specifically those which involve comma have been identified from students' scripts, seminar papers and long essays. The errors are classified into various types, described, explained, evaluated and corrected; the causes of the errors are given and suggestions on how to minimise future occurrence are proffered.

6. Discussion and Analysis of Errors

The data are grouped into four based on the types of punctuation errors which occur in the sentences. The data contains errors in the separation of syntactic units, coordinate elements, intrusive elements and the use of comma in relative clauses.

6.1 The Separation of Syntactic Units

A sentence consists of syntactic units which enter into meaning relations with one another. Any spurious separation of these units may result in infelicity. The following examples illustrate the erroneous use of comma in syntactic units:

1. *Even the candidate who had the highest score (,) was not admitted.
2. *People who did not attend the interview (,) were the ones employed.
3. *The lecturer said (,) the drama was a farce.
4. *Our secretary observed (,) that the information was not correct.
5. *The suggestion of the Student Union Government (,) has been accepted and implemented.
6. *Those students (,) were the ones falsely accused and blackmailed.

These sentences consist of punctuation errors which result from the separation of either the subject or the object from its verb because comma is regarded as a separation unit and it is also an indicator of a short pause. In sentences 1, 2, 5 and 6, comma separates the subject from the verb. *Even the candidate who had the highest score, people who did not attend the interview, the suggestion of the student union government* and *those students* are the subjects of their respective verbs, therefore, as a matter of grammatical rule cannot be separated from their verbs. The subject of the sentence is separated from its verb only when there is an intrusive element or if there is a momentary confusion through two occurrences of the same word (Hodges & Whitten, 1977) as in: I know that, that man is a fraudster.

In Entries 3 and 4, comma separates the verbs *said* and *observed* from their respective object *the drama was a farce* and *that the information was correct* respectively. These verbs mandatorily subcategorise noun phrase (NP) complements, that is, require an object so as to be fully realized since they are transitive verbs. *The drama was a farce* as well as *that the information was not correct* are noun clauses which function as objects of their respective verbs. Just as it is wrong to separate the subject of the sentence from its verb, it is also inappropriate to separate a transitive verb from its object as our data (3 and 4) do since such verbs take an object for their full realization. In Entry 6, comma is inserted immediately after *those students* which functions as the subject of this sentence. Two errors are spotted in this sentence – the first one is the separation of the subject (*those students*) from its main verb – *were* while the second is the separation of the subject from its NP complement (*the ones who were falsely accused and blackmailed*) after the linking verb (*were*) in which it is co-referential with. In a co-referential relationship, the subject and its subject complement refer to one and the same entity. The pause after *students* is not significant enough to warrant the use of comma. The error arises from the perceived lowering of the voice in *students* which is deemed to require a comma. Comma is not inserted in every instance of a pause for breath unless the grammar of the unit in which the pause appears requires it (Hodges & Whitten, 1977, Kolln & Funk, 2009).

6.2 The Comma in Coordinate Structures

In coordination, two related ideas in words, phrases and clauses of equal rank are combined into a single sentence. However, students' writing quite often breach the rule of syntactic coordination as the following examples illustrate:

7. *All the votes in the Student Union Government election were carefully counted (,) and recorded.
8. *I worked hard for first semester examination (,) and I passed well.
9. *The decision of the Governing Council of the University to halt further increase in school fees was applauded (,) and celebrated by the students.
10. *Our landlord asked all the students to pay their rent (,) but (,) we refused.

In Entries 7 and 8, the commas are misused since it is wrong to insert a comma before and after a coordinating conjunction. Sentences 7 and 9 feature co-ordinated verb phrases – *were carefully counted and recorded* and *was applauded and celebrated* while (8) contains two co-ordinate main clauses – *I worked very hard for first semester examination* and *I passed very well*. The verb phrases in 7 and 9 and the clauses in (8) are of equal grammatical status since they express related ideas, therefore one cannot be separated from the other by comma. The function of the conjunct is simply to bring the two clauses together within one sentence to form a compound since the two conjoined parts can go well together. When two conjoined parts can co-occur, no comma is required. The coordinator may be replaced with a semi-colon, “*I worked hard for first semester examination; I passed well.*” We can as well use a coordinator like *and* without a comma to link them, “*I worked hard for first semester examination and I passed well.*”

A comma is affixed between such expressions if the second clause expresses a contrastive idea after the coordinators like (*but/yet*) (Babalola, 2000, Greenbaum & Nelson, 2009) as in token 10. The comma before the conjunct *but* in (10) is appropriate as it conforms to comma selection processes since comma is usually introduced by a coordinator which expresses a contrast and the second part of this sentence expresses a contrast. *We refused* is a contrastive idea, a negation of the idea expressed in the first clause. Its use is therefore determined by semantics and grammar. In addition, the insertion of comma after the conjunct is erroneous. The

errors are traced to the conspicuous pauses after *counted* in 7, *examination* in 8, *applauded* in 9 and *rent* in 10 which induce the users to conclude erroneously that the pauses need a comma whereas it is inappropriate to do so since it is not every pause for breath that calls for a comma (Hodges & Whitten, 1977, Kolln & Funk, 2009).

6.3 The Comma in Intrusive Elements

Entries 11 and 12 contain intrusive elements, that is, occurs in apposition – *right from the beginning of the semester*, and *good at insulting students* respectively. An intrusive element usually carries non-essential information and may be omitted in a sentence. Such an element is usually flanked and separated by two commas, one before and one after it.

11. Students should *right from the beginning of the semester* (,) work hard.

12. The Dean's Secretary (,) *good at insulting students* will be dealt with one day.

The rule is that those expressions introduced by adjectives, adverbs and prepositions may be intruded into a clause and such elements take a comma before and after them. This rule tends to apply in the sample sentences but not fully. In Entry 11, a comma is inserted before the intrusive element *right from the beginning of the semester* but none after it while in (12), a comma is inserted after the intruded element *good at insulting students* but none before it thereby violating the writing convention of English. In this instance, comma serves as an included unit. These errors are significant. The respondents are not aware that such units of grammar when separated use opening and closing commas because they are included units. In an included unit, "the unit which is separated is in the position of interrupting some larger units and the orthographic symbol must therefore be correlative, marking both the beginning and the ending of the included unit" (Quirk et al (1985) quoted in Babalola, 2005, p. 270). Violating the mutual connection between the commas in separating the included units is inappropriate. Teachers are therefore advised to bring the knowledge of the application of comma in such intrusive elements to the attention of the learners.

6.4 The Comma in Relative Clauses

A relative clause which accompanies a noun phrase functions as the post-modifier of that noun phrase. While some relative clauses take a comma, some do not. The following are examples of relative clauses extracted from students' scripts:

13. The boy (,) who impersonated in the examination (,) has been apprehended.

14. The lecturer (,) that we met yesterday (,) is always very rude to students.

15. The new car that my father bought last year (,) was stolen by our security guard.

16. The Faculty of Arts Librarian who was introduced to us (,) is a very unsteady person.

17. The rumour (,) which was spreading like wildfire on campus that school fees will be increased created a very serious tension.

Entries 13 to 17 feature relative clauses of different kinds. Whereas 13 to 15 are restrictive relative clauses, 16 – 17 are non-restrictive relative clauses. In 13 to 15, the relative clauses *who impersonated in the examination*, *that we met yesterday* and *that my father bought last year* function as adjectives modifying the nouns *boy*, *lecturer* and *car* respectively. Such clauses are not separated by commas as done in the tokens. As restrictive clauses, they are integral parts of their respective sentences since they define the nouns they follow. It is for this reason they are known by the label restrictive, and sometimes called defining relative clauses (Ndimele, 1994, Radford, 2004).

Semantically, a relative clause answers the questions "Which one?" or "What kind of?" (Kolln & Funk, 2009). Entries 13-14 tell which boy and which lecturer is referred to while 15 tells which car. Each relative clause in the Entries therefore identifies the noun it modifies and relative clause introducers, the relative pronouns *which*, *who* and *that* syntactically signals the presence of a relative clause, whether restrictive or non-restrictive. As a matter of punctuation rule, such clauses cannot be separated from the nouns they modify as they occur as modifiers of the nouns they co-occur with thereby imputing orthographic information on grammar. The relative clauses in focus (13 – 14), characteristic of restrictive relative clause in general, convey specific information and identify more closely the nouns they modify. It is therefore wrong to separate them from the nouns they specify both before and after as the respondents do since in English, a comma does not separate such clauses since the separation is dictated by grammar.

On the contrary, when the information is additional or non-essential, a comma separates the two clauses which constitute the unit. Entries 16 and 17 are non-restrictive or non-defining relative clauses. In our tokens, the non-restrictive relative clauses, *who was introduced to us* and *which I told you* are either separated by a comma or not at all. This is inappropriate given the nature of this class of relative clause. The fact is that a non-restrictive clause also known as non-defining relative clause does not define nor give any specific information about the noun it modifies as a restrictive clause does. It does not identify the noun more closely rather it gives additional or further but non-essential information about the noun, the very reason it may be deleted from the sentence. In Entry 16, the non-restrictive relative clause is separated by a closing comma but not opened by a

comma while in 17 the non-restrictive clause is not indicated at all thereby breaching the punctuation requirement of non-restrictive clause. The error is traced to ignorance of the syntactic and semantic nature of relative clauses and the interrelationship between relative clause and punctuation.

6.5 Comma in Subordinate Clauses

Wrong use of comma in subordinate clauses also predominate students' writing as the following excerpts show:

18. There was a tumultuous uproar (,) when it was time for the Vice Chancellor to address the students.
19. She went out of the examination hall with her answer script but returned it later (,) after she was told to do so.
20. The President has not told Nigerians (,) when the economy will improve.
21. Many Nigerian youths have taken to crime (,) because there is massive unemployment in the country.

Entries 18 – 21 feature subordinate clauses – when it was time for the vice chancellor to address the students, after she was told to do so, when the economy will improve and because there is massive unemployment in the countr:. The use of comma in subordinate clauses is defined by graphology-syntactic rule which specifies that when a subordinate clause occurs before the main clause, a comma is usually inserted between the two clauses but when a subordinate clause occurs after the main clause, no comma separates the two parts. In the tokens, each of the sentences starts with a main clause – There was a tumultuous uproar, she went out of the examination hall with her answer script, the President has not told Nigerians and many Nigerian youths have taken to crime. After each of these independent clauses, a comma is inserted before the subordinate clause introduced by the subordinators when, after and because. This inappropriate use violates the punctuation convention on the use of comma with subordinate clauses. The respondents' choice of comma after the subordinate clause does not conform to the comma requirement of a subordinate clause in sentence final position.

When a subordinate clause occurs at the beginning of a sentence, it is immediately followed by a comma but this rule is often violated in most students writing as in the following tokens:

22. Because of heavy rainfall this semester lectures are not as effective as they normally are.
23. While the Minister of Finance was still addressing the audience one enraged young man charged at him.
24. Although English is used as the first language by children in most educated homes in Nigeria the parents still use indigenous languages for interaction between themselves..

In the examples, the subordinate clauses – because of heavy rainfall this semester, while the minister was still addressing the audience and although English is used as the first language by children in most educated homes occur in sentence initial position yet comma is conspicuously omitted in violation of the rule whereas, as earlier stated, when a subordinate clause introduces a sentence, it is marked off by comma. Sometimes, the rules are misapplied by substituting one rule for the other. The mix up is due to ignorance on the use of comma in subordinate clauses and a clear evidence of incomplete learning.

6.6 The Comma in Appositive Constructions

Appositive elements are positioned before the noun expressions they refer to and the comma plays a vital role in appositive constructions. However, the relevance of comma in appositive constructions is quite often not observed in students' writing as the following examples show:

25. The word, grassroots (,) is heavily abused by politicians.
26. The expression (,) grammatical construction (,) is sometimes confusing to us students because sometimes we feel that what we write are grammatically correct only to be told that they are not.
27. Our hall representative (,) Mr. Ubon Ekong is implicated in a rape case.
28. The Nigerian President elected lasted year (,) is always on the move.

The appositive elements in examples 25 – 28 are *grassroots*, *grammatical construction*, *Mr Ubon Ekong* and *elected last year*. Since these appositive phrases are of different types, the comma applies differently in each of the types. In 25-26, *grassroots* and *grammatical construction* are restrictive appositions while *Mr Ubon Ekong* and *elected last year* are instances of non-restrictive appositive phrases. Grammatical elements in apposition are positioned before the noun expressions they refer to. Just as it is with restrictive relative clauses, restrictive appositive elements are not separated by comma whether before or after them. Grammatical elements which are in apposition join elements that are of equal grammatical status/rank and the grammatical relation must be of identical or similar reference. This explains the error in the examples. *Mr. Ubon Ekong* and *elected last year* are non-restrictive apposition constructions; like non-restrictive relative clause, they are separated by a comma before and after in writing (Leech & Svartvik, 2002). Ignorance of punctuation rules, improper understanding of the use of comma in appositive constructions and poor teaching of punctuation cause these errors. The infelicity is due to failure to recognize the grammatical units involved in the position comma is to be inserted and the meaning expressed.

Irrespective of whether punctuation may be heavy or light, there are some basic positions a punctuation mark like comma need apply. The errors identified and analyzed reflect the current L2 development of the

learners, that is, their underlying competence. In the process of learning the target language, they construct a system of applying comma based on their limited understanding of the use of comma. Since second language learning follows a continuum of interlanguage, the chances are that their underlying competence will improve as they are continually exposed to the rudiments of punctuation. For the final year students, this may be true; for the higher degree students, it is doubtful. Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) caution that it is erroneous to think that because a language learner is continually exposed to the target language he will steadily grow in his or her mastery of the target language.

Corder (1981) had earlier averred that as soon as the language learner's interlanguage grammar is sufficiently developed to the extent that he can adequately communicate his/her ideas and the learner's level of language development is such that can adequately serve his basic communication purposes, the desire to improve decreases. It is therefore necessary to expose L2 learners of English to the rudiments of the language like the appropriate use of punctuation marks at the primary and secondary school levels so that at the higher level of education, areas of confusion are minimized, weaknesses are corrected and the performance level enhanced since the number of those who are able to speak, read and write the target language correctly reflects the level of literacy of the society.

7. Summary and Conclusion

Following the discussion, error analysis can help teachers of English to engage in effective teaching. The argument is that it is not sufficient to identify errors in students' scripts but also to observe very closely recurring errors and to identify the sources of the errors. During feedback it is advisable to draw learners' attention to the errors by describing the nature of the errors and explaining why they are regarded as errors. It is of utmost importance to engage learners' cognitive ability in the process of correction before the teacher's intervention.

From all the analyses, comma is not just an orthographic symbol but is related to grammar and quite often indicated according to grammatical rules. Whereas a punctuation mark like full stop indicates meaning boundary in a sentence, comma specifies both meaning and grammatical information. According to the discussion, even though comma belongs to the orthographic rules of English it indicates grammatical structures in a sentence. These rules are learnt but not acquired. Without the mastery of grammatical rules, a learner will not know why, how, when and where to apply this punctuation mark appropriately.

Language teachers are more theoretical in the teaching of punctuation, and less practical in their methods and approaches, a method which should be de-emphasized. It is, therefore, not surprising that most Nigerian users of English use comma haphazardly either through awkward specification or non-specification of comma, carelessness or impatient with its use in their pieces of writing. Because of the relevance of punctuation like comma to intelligent, good and effective written communication, punctuation teaching should be incorporated in appropriate places during grammar teaching.

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